

L E S S O N 2

The Articles of Confederation

THINKING FOCUS

How did the Articles of Confederation divide power between the new national government and the state governments?

Key Terms

- sovereignty
- term of office

► *The docks and shipyards of the Philadelphia waterfront spread out along the banks of the Delaware River.*

Imagine that you are a merchant in the new nation. One morning in 1785 as the tide goes out, your two-masted schooner slips away from a busy Philadelphia dock. It is bound for Charleston, South Carolina.

Your ship hugs the coastline during the trip south. With some of the profit from selling a cargo of wheat flour from Pennsylvania mills, you plan to buy indigo—a plant that produces a beautiful deep blue dye.

After a week, the ship finally docks in Charleston. Unlike Europe, where travel is restricted, the new nation allows you to enter another state freely without a passport.

Despite any differences between you and the people in Charleston, you will be doing business together as citizens of the same nation. The Articles of Confederation promise the “free

inhabitants of each of these states . . . all privileges and immunities of free citizens in the several states.”

You are anticipating difficulties, however. You can now trade freely with merchants from different states, without excessive import taxes and regulations. But you still face the problem of doing business with different money issued by each state. You worry that the money you will receive will not be equal to the value of your cargo, and you will not be able to spend it when you return home to Philadelphia. Often money issued by the states is worth only a fraction of its face value. You believe that the need for uniform currency—worth the same amount wherever it is spent—points to the need for a strong central government to issue that currency and to vouch for its value.



Confederation Works for Wartime

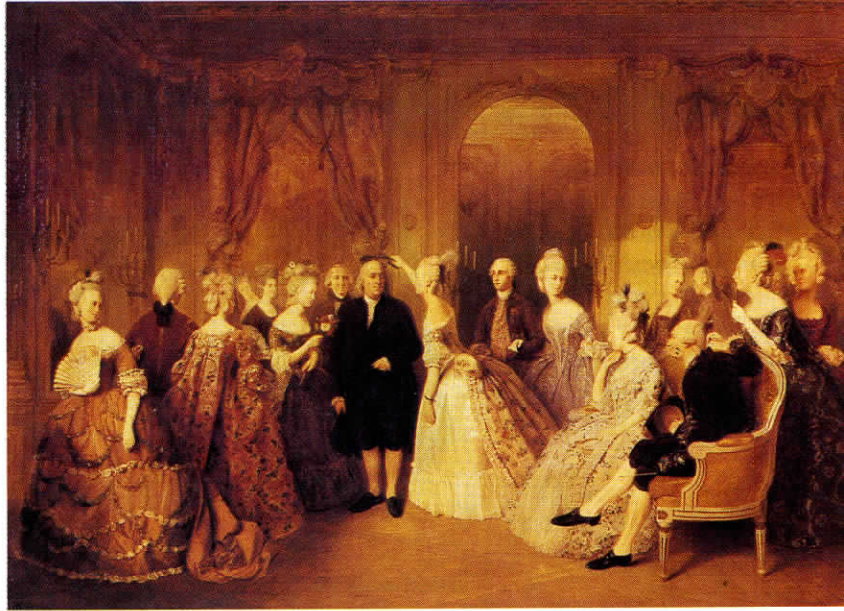
Even before all the states accepted the Articles, Congress had used them as a working plan of government. Americans desperately needed a system by which to raise and pay an army to fight Great Britain.

No member of Congress played a more important role in funding the Revolutionary army than the prominent Philadelphia merchant Robert Morris. As superintendent of finance, he borrowed money and bought supplies to keep Washington's troops on the battlefield. Morris was dedicated to strengthening the Confederation, at the same time making a profit for himself and his friends.

Congress also sent diplomats to Europe to gain support for the Confederation's military efforts against Great Britain. After the colonists' victory at Saratoga in 1777, American diplomats showed off a French translation of the Articles to demonstrate that the United States had a serious new government worthy of aid. Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and John Jay impressed Europeans with their arguments. They gained diplomatic and financial support from France, Holland, Russia, and Spain.

After the war ended in 1781, the Confederation government sent three seasoned diplomats—Franklin, Adams, and Jay—to Paris to negotiate a peace treaty. They won not only Great Britain's recognition of Ameri-

▼ *This painting shows Franklin in the French royal court at Versailles surrounded by a crowd of admirers.*



can independence but also all British territory south of the Great Lakes and east of the Mississippi River, the Northwest Territory, and the old Southwest Territory. The victory at the peace table in 1783 was as stunning as the battle at Yorktown. ■

■ *How did the Articles help win support from Europeans for the American cause?*

The Articles Define Government

At first, most Americans found it difficult to think of their new confederation as a true union. The Articles were an attempt to create a national government that would unite 13 very diverse colonies. Although the new government was weak, Thomas Jefferson regarded it as a model—the best government “existing or that ever did exist.”

Congressional Powers

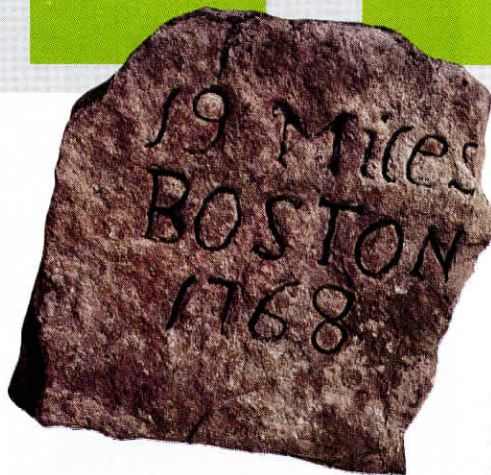
The Articles did give the Congress a few of the powers typical of an independent, sovereign nation. For

example, Congress alone had the **sovereignty**—the supreme authority and power—to conduct foreign affairs, send ambassadors, and negotiate treaties. The individual states had given up such powers when they signed the Articles. Congress controlled the national army and appointed its officers. It held the sole right to coin money, to establish weights and measures, and to operate a national postal system. The chart on the following page shows how the postal system worked.

The national government con-



▲ Parts of the postal system shown in the diagram were inherited from the British colonial system. This milestone was located along the old post road between New York and Boston.



sisted only of Congress and the agencies created by it. Congress established four important departments: foreign affairs, war, finance, and the post office. These were forerunners of executive agencies that exist in the federal government today.

Limited Sovereignty

The Articles deliberately kept the central government weak so that the freedom of each state was not threatened. There was no executive branch to enforce the will of Congress. The “president” was merely a member of Congress appointed to preside over each congressional session. The lack

of a national court meant that disputes between states had to be settled either through negotiation in interstate commissions or in state courts. Because each state court tended to favor its own state, this policy did not work well.

All important decisions in Congress required the approval of at least nine states. Even so, resolutions of Congress were merely recommendations to the states, unless the resolution dealt with matters over which Congress had total control. For example, although Congress could make treaties, it could not enforce them. When New York took away lands owned by British Loyalists—a violation of the 1783 treaty—Congress could do nothing.

In addition, members of Congress were elected for only a year-long **term of office** and could not serve more than three of these limited periods within six years. Thus, by the time a delegate had acquired enough experience to be effective in Congress, he was forced to leave Congress for at least three years. ■

■ What was the national government's most serious weakness under the Articles of Confederation?

Morris Funds the National Treasury

Robert Morris had to deal with the government's biggest problem: Congress lacked the power under the Articles to tax its citizens directly. Congress assigned to each state a share of the funds needed by the national government. The share was

based on the value of that state's land. Congress could only hope that the state governments would be cooperative and collect money for them. The national government was often fortunate to receive even one-fourth of the funds requested from the states.

Morris worked heroically to keep the government financially solvent, sometimes purchasing army supplies with his personal funds. Still, the national treasury was often bare. In a letter sent to Morris in 1783, General Washington wrote:

I have often reflected, with much Solicitude, upon the disagreeableness of your Situation and the Negligence of the several States, in not enabling you to do that Justice to the public Creditors, which their Demands require. I wish the Step you have taken, may sound the Alarm to their inmost Souls, and rouse them to a just Sense of their own Interest, honor and Credit.

Matters worsened as the Revolutionary War was ending. Soldiers grumbled about not being paid, and many

General Washington had to use his prestige to stop this revolt. As he put on his spectacles before speaking to the men at Newburgh, he said: “Gentlemen, I have grown gray in your service, and now I am going blind.” He silenced the protesters, at least temporarily. Even so, other soldiers marched on Philadelphia three months later to demand payment for their services, forcing the government to flee to Princeton, New Jersey.

During this time, Congress had been printing money to pay for military supplies and salaries without having the gold to back up the paper. Many people would not accept the national government’s paper currency—basically worthless—as payment for debts. So the states issued their own paper currency, backed only by “full faith and credit”—that is, people’s confidence that the state could pay its debts. People who traveled from state to state had to carry or obtain different kinds of paper money. Naturally, this hampered trade between the states.

Many states wanted to create a strong currency, but the lack of gold and silver in circulation made this task difficult. The states set limits on the amount of currency that they put into circulation. They also raised taxes to pay their debts promptly. These measures made borrowing expensive and led to a crisis in western Massachusetts. Indeed, the problems of banking and currency would not be resolved for another 100 years. ■

► This gold coin, minted by New York in 1787, was called a doubloon. The face value of this paper money, printed by South Carolina in 1778, was five shillings. The names doubloon and shilling came from European money of the time.



■ If the states still issued their own money today, how would trade and travel within the country be different?

feared that they would never receive their promised wages.

In March 1783, a group of soldiers and officers in Newburgh, New York, plotted to overthrow the government.

REVIEW

1. **FOCUS** How did the Articles of Confederation divide power between the new national government and the state governments?
2. **CONNECT** Relate Washington’s point of view in his letter to Morris to Washington’s problems with feeding and clothing his army during the Revolutionary War.
3. **POLITICAL SYSTEMS** What are some aspects of the early government that have been carried over into the twentieth century?
4. **CRITICAL THINKING** What are some advantages and disadvantages of a weak central government?
5. **WRITING ACTIVITY** Imagine that you are Robert Morris trying to persuade the states to pay their shares into the treasury. Write a convincing letter to them.